

Communication Corner

Agitation in Older Persons with Dementia (Part II)

People with dementia are very sensitive to their environment. They are less able to handle changes, uncertainty, and other situations that they could manage when they were well. More than half of residents with some form of dementia exhibit some type of agitation.¹ Behavior management experts define "agitation behavior" as inappropriate verbal or motor activity."

- Non-aggressive Verbal Behavior: Incoherent babbling, screaming or repetitive questions.
- Non-aggressive Physical Behavior: Pacing, wandering, repetitive body motions, hoarding or shadowing.
- Aggressive Verbal Behavior: Cursing and abusive and abusive language.
- Aggressive Physical Behavior: Physically aggressive behavior, such as hitting, scratching, or kicking.

Environmental causes of agitation in older persons with dementia include: sensory overload- too much noise, activity, or clutter, or too many people in the environment; unfamiliar people, places, or sounds; sudden movements, startling noises; feeling lost, insecure, or forgotten; difficulty adjusting to darkness from well-lighted area and vice versa. According to researchers, more than 23 people in a group can cause undue stress.² Another interesting

finding indicates that the television, mirror image, dolls or figurines may represent extra people in the environment. While this list is not exclusive, it identifies some of the most common triggers of agitation.

The ideal environment for a person with dementia provides clear, calm, comforting structure. Routine is very important since changes in schedule or rushing can cause extreme disappointment, frustration, or fear. A physically comfortable environment is important. Some suggestions for structuring the physical and psychosocial environment include:

- providing a predictable routine for the patient; separate disruptive and noisy persons from quieter persons;
- control door access, use safety latches to prevent egress;
- provide familiar objects, such as family pictures and orienting stimuli (e.g., clock, calendar); provide bright daytime lighting;
- use a night-light in bedroom during hours of sleep.

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www.fairfaxcounty.gov/service/aa/html/Ombud_main.htm

¹ <http://www.ec-online.net/Knowledge/Articles/agitation.htm>

² Ibid.

National Institute on Aging. 1999. Progress Report on Alzheimer's Disease. Silver Spring, MD: NIA.

<http://www.psyhguides.com/gahe.html>

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